

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41154-7 - Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience

Maurice Bloch

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Maurice Bloch has for many years been developing an original and influential theory of ritual. In this book he synthesises a radical theory of religion. Rituals in a great many societies deny the transience of life and of human institutions. Bloch argues that they enact this denial by symbolically sacrificing the participants themselves, so allowing them to participate in the immortality of a transcendent entity. Such sacrifices are achieved through acts of symbolic violence, ranging from bodily mutilations to the killing of animals. The theme is developed with reference to rituals of many types, from a variety of ethnographic sources, and Bloch shows that even exogamous marriage rituals can be reinterpreted in the light of this thesis. He concludes by considering the indirect relation of symbolic and ritual violence to political violence.

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THE LEWIS HENRY MORGAN LECTURES 1984

*presented at
The University of Rochester
Rochester, New York*



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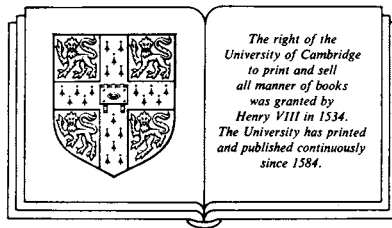
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MAURICE BLOCH



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Foreword

In 1987, Professor Bloch delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester on 17, 19, 24 and 29 February. His general title was then, as it is now, *Prey into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience*, with the individual lectures entitled ‘Initiation: the containment of strength’, ‘Sacrifice: the aggressive death’, ‘Marriage: being swallowed and swallowing’, ‘Myth and millennium: the uncertainties of continuity’. Revision, expansion and rearrangement of the originals have resulted in the present version – an intriguing study that offers readers ample intellectual fare.

Unlike his earlier work on the Merina, dealt with in *From Blessing to Violence*, Professor Bloch is not here concerned with an historical examination of the examples he considers, although he pursues some of the more general ideas adumbrated in *From Blessing to Violence*. His present study is aimed at establishing ‘the irreducible core of the ritual process’ and the factors determining it. Part of that core is what he terms ‘rebounding violence’. A major feature of this book is the elaboration of this concept, by examination of the ways in which it is manifested in a wide range of rituals.

Professor Bloch distinguishes this work from much that he has done earlier, since he is not here primarily concerned with history. He also makes clear the differences between his concepts and conclusions and those of many earlier anthropologists working on the same or closely related problems. This is a generalising comparative study, quite clearly intended to challenge much widely accepted work. The possibilities implied by Professor Bloch’s presentation are very considerable indeed, and it is obvious that he has in mind not only anthropological work, but historical work as well.

The limits of a foreword preclude discussion of Professor Bloch’s complex and ingenious analysis of the widely distributed examples he has adduced to illustrate his points. It should be noted here that this version of the original lectures retains much of the liveliness and freshness of Professor Bloch’s oral presentation, so the distinction between auditors and readers becomes

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blurred, and the book invites all to engage in the continuing construction of anthropology.

Alfred Harris

Editor

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